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THE PLAN OF THE "CANTERBURY TALES"

If Ferdinand Brunetière could be admitted to the counsels of latter-day scholarship he would have something pertinent to say about the much-discussed plan of the *Canterbury Tales*. With some reference to his *L'Évolution des genres dans l'histoire de la littérature*, he would emphasize the obvious facts that *The Book of the Tales of Canterbury* is an ingenious variation of a popular literary species, the story book; that there was brought to bear upon this *genre* a *motif* that had before been repeatedly proved, that of the pilgrimage; and finally—what is known, but sometimes not well remembered—that Chaucer's character book, the General Prologue, is a vivid realization in skilfully dramatic combination of that form of social satire which is specifically designated the *États du monde*.¹ These elements of Chaucer's scheme had appeared before the *Canterbury Tales*, apart and in certain combinations; their finished incorporation into his great human comedy can be explained only with reference to Brunetière's "seul homme."

And yet, as the great French critic would have been the first to note, there were mutations and combinations of these elements in antecedent literature which show what may be called their natural aptitudes. The threefold classification of men into those who fight, those who pray, and those who work appears at least as early as Alfred's Boethius (Chap. xvii; Sedgefield's ed., p. 40), not to mention Plato's husbandmen, soldiers, and philosophers in the second book of the *Republic*. Throughout the Middle Ages the classification was frequently employed; as, for instance, by Hugues de Bersil,² who tells us in his Bible that the three orders were ordained, "Quant Diex nous ot d'enfer rescous." It was in the failure of the estates to perform their assigned functions that the mediaeval Jeremiah and satirist found their opportunity. In the *De diversis ordinibus* (Wright, *Latin Poems*, Camden Society, 1841; p. 229) we learn that the *comites* and *milites* devour the substance of the poor; the world is filled with priests but scarcely a sober one is found; and the poor man would rather die than work. Similar censure may be noted in Deschamps' *Estas du monde* (II, 226 ff.) and in many other places. Of course the *États du monde* was an elastic

¹ See P. Meyer, *Romania*, IV, 385 ff.

² *Histoire littéraire*, XVIII, 816 ff.; *Romania*, XVIII, 553 ff.

classification, so that general satire upon the clergy easily becomes special satire upon cardinals, monks, and friars; and particular attention is given to merchants, lawyers, etc. In the *Livre de l'exemple du riche homme et du ladre* (Meyer, *Notices et Extraits*, XXXIV, 176 ff.) we find about thirty different classes (approximately the number of Chaucer's pilgrims), including gamblers, tavern-keepers, and parasites. Particularly interesting as anticipating the Wife of Bath, who alone among Chaucer's pilgrims is not introduced specifically as the representative of a calling, is the recognition of matrimony as one of the *états*. Jean de Condé, for instance, after attacking in his *Dis des Estas dou monde* (ed. Scheler, II, 371 ff.) clerks, prelates, knights, princes, justices, squires, etc., turns his attention to married people. Matrimony is similarly classified in the *Estas du siècle* of the *Rec. génér. d. fabliaux* (II, 264). Rutebeuf's *La vie du monde* (vss. 178 ff.; Jubinal, II, 44) puts the matter very neatly:

Sor totes autres ordres doit-on mult honorer
L'ordre de mariage et amer et garder :

Certes c'est grant doleurs que je ne puis trouver
En cest siècle estat ù homs se puist salver.

Professor Tupper (*Nation*, October 16, 1913, 354 ff.) reminds us that Venus, the patron saint of pilgrims, is particularly represented in Chaucer's company by the Wife of Bath. However, from what has been said above, it will be clear that a reservation among the pilgrims had been made for her long before Chaucer's book was written.

In pre-Chaucerian literature, then, we have well defined the type which Chaucer splendidly realized in the General Prologue. Moreover, we find there anticipations of his narrative adaptation of that type. The *Roman de carité*, which Professor Kittredge has shown that Chaucer knew, is, like the *Canterbury Tales*, a book of travel, with the differences that the poet visits the estates of the world instead of traveling in their company, and that his destination is not Canterbury or any other place on the map but the uncertain abode of Charity. She can be found neither among the lawyers at Bologna nor among the doctors at Salerno; the monks know nothing of her. And so after seeking Charity in vain among the men who fight and the men who pray, the poet turns to the "people menu." With this story one naturally associates not only such books as the *Speculum stultorum* and the *Architrenius*, but the *Pèlerinage* of Deguillville, with whose work Chaucer was acquainted.

That in these uses of the travel or pilgrimage *motif*, adjusted more or less closely to the *États du monde*, we are concerned chiefly with allegory should not disturb us; because allegory and social satire go hand in hand and because mediaeval allegory is nearer akin to Chaucer's realism than is direct satire. When we seek prototypes for the vividly described Canterbury pilgrims we turn to the *Romance of the Rose* or *Piers Plowman*; the figures on the wall of the garden of love, Fals-Semblaunt, the Duenna, have much to teach the student of the Prologue. In the Middle Ages the literature of realism grows easily in the soil of symbolism. "Every devout or undevout frequenter of the church in that time," writes Professor Saintsbury, "knew Accidia and Avarice, Anger and Pride as bodily rather than ghostly enemies, furnished with a regular uniform, appearing in recognized circumstances and companies, acting like human beings." Moreover, the vividly seen, graphically represented Sins are closely associated with the several estates. In the *Marriage of the Daughters of the Devil* (Meyer, *Romania*, XXIX, 54 ff.) each calling has its pet sin—and one of the "callings" is matrimony! The devil, we are told, married *Mauweisté*, and of the happy union were born Simony, Hypocrisy, Ravine, Usury, Treachery, Sacrilege, False Service, Pride, and Lechery. In time all these daughters except Lechery were married: Simony to the Prelates, Hypocrisy to the Monks, Plunder to the Knights, Usury to the Bourgeoisie, Treachery to the Merchants, Sacrilege to the Laity, False Service to *prévôts* and bailiffs, and Pride to the *dames* and *damsels*. Such associations as we have here will suggest further that there was ample precedent in pre-Chaucerian satire concerned with the estates of the world for that attention which Chaucer gives in the *Canterbury Tales* to the Seven Deadly Sins.¹

So far, then, the approaches would seem to be clear, not only to Chaucer's graphic description of his pilgrims but to the narrative turn which he has given his social satire. To Chaucer's combination of pilgrimage and vividly described pilgrims *Piers Plowman* furnishes the nearest analogue. Chronology, at least, permits us to believe that the author of the *Canterbury Pilgrimage* knew of the *Pilgrimage to the Shrine of Truth*. At all events the episode shows an easy development of social satire along narrative lines and in the direction of realism. That something like this might have

¹ See Professor Tupper's admirable article in the *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, N. S., XXII, 93 ff.

grown in Chaucer's mind as well as in that of the alliterative poet seems, in the light of all that I have said, a matter of no great wonder. That, further, our poet should have grafted the social satire in narrative form upon the stock of the familiar story-book type is something easily credited to Brunetière's "seul homme." Certainly, if we take into account Sercambi's *Novelle* on the one hand (Hinckley, *Notes on Chaucer*; Young, *Kittredge Anniversary Volume*) and *Piers Plowman* on the other, we find ourselves on the very threshold of the *Canterbury Tales*.

Chaucer's variation of the story-book type is, therefore, one for which pre-Chaucerian literature prepares us. Not that we can wholly account for it by reference to any natural law in the literary world. As Professor Manly remarks,¹ "You have to take account of the presence and absence of genius"; and as Brunetière says, "one man is often sufficient to deviate the course of things." But the habitation of genius is not a waste place; the Muse does not command the genius to build without bricks or straw. There were visions of heaven and hell before the *Divine Comedy*; and plays both courtly and Senecan before Shakspeare. The interesting question raised by the plan of the *Canterbury Tales* is not one of immediate sources, but one of literary aptitudes and tendencies. Chaucer, no doubt, followed the road to Canterbury, and certainly he saw by the light of good-fellowship the streets and taverns of London. We may well believe that he made a pilgrimage similar to the one of which he writes, and we must believe that in the custom-house and in the French wars he saw merchants from overseas and knights of courtesy. That he had a number of first-hand and vivid impressions is perfectly clear. But besides having vital relations with the world of men, Chaucer found himself in the currents and cross-currents of many literary forces, setting more or less strongly in definite directions. It has not been attempted here to show that Chaucer was the creature of a relentless law of literary evolution; far less that his work was done for him by his predecessors. Rather it appears that many were groping where Chaucer found the way, but that he spoke in his admirably effective manner on pretty definite hints in antecedent literature.

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¹ "Literary Form and the Origin of Species," *Modern Philology*, IV, 577 ff.